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ABSTRACT

A study determined if an individual's approach to conflict management could be altered by completing a college conflict resolution class. Subjects enrolled in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course at a medium-sized, midwestern university. The pretest condition consisted of 15 females and 13 males, of whom 10 were undergraduate and 18 were graduate students. The posttest condition consisted of 14 females and 11 males, of whom 10 were undergraduate and 15 were graduate students. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Assessment form was used as pre- and post-test measure of subjects' perceived response to conflict situations. Results indicated that: (1) subjects shifted toward a preference in using a collaborative management style but still continued to use competing and compromising management styles; (2) an overall gender effect existed in the shift of perceived management style; and (3) more educated group placed less reliance on avoidance than the less educated group. (Contains nine references and four tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: USING THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT TO ASSESS LEVELS OF LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Many societies express contradictory views of conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). They contended that "conflict" is a process that is natural in human activity. By its nature conflict is interactive (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1993). Hocker and Wilmot (1991) further contended that conflict is inherent in every relationship that is important to people. They noted conflict is subject to constructive management through effective communication.

The purpose of this field study was to determine if an individual's approach to conflict management could be altered by completing a college conflict resolution class. The study looked at three hypotheses: H1: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict and, thereby alter one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style. H2: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and gender would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style. H3: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and the individual's level of education would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Assessment form was used as a pre- and post-test measure of the subjects' perceived response to conflict situations. Following the treatment data analysis for H1 was not upheld. However, there was an overall gender effect in the shift of perceived management style, thereby upholding H2. The only significant change found relating to H3 was in the selection of "avoidance" as a conflict management style.

> No matter what you have learned about conflict in the past, however, troubling or harmful your interactions have been, you have the opportunity to change your part of the interaction. What you have learned can be relearned a different way.
>
> Hocker and Wilmot, 1995, p. 2

Introduction

For the past 25 years teachers of communication and researchers have sought to identify and teach effective conflict management behaviors as well as specific techniques which increase the potential for positive management of conflict at home, play, and work. As we move into the 21st century, however, will it be necessary to change how individuals manage conflict in a technologically oriented society?

Conflict is a complicated phenomenon (Whitten, 1994). He noted that how people respond to conflict may be influenced by many variables. He posited that training, experience, attitude, and perception of the conflict are among the factors affecting the success of conflict management.

Purpose

Given the importance of interpersonal conflict and its relationship to effective leadership, the purpose of this field study was to determine if an individual's approach to conflict management could be altered by completing a college conflict resolution class.

Conflict Management

Many societies express contradictory views of conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). They contended that "conflict" is a process that is natural in human activity. By its nature conflict is interactive (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1993). Hocker and Wilmot (1991) further contended that conflict is inherent in

every relationship that is important to people. Finally, they noted it is subject to constructive management through effective communication.

In the past people thought harmony was the "normal" state of relationships. On the other hand, conflict was regarded as an "abnormal" condition. This "abnormality" was thought to display itself as disagreements between people; in other words, conflict and disagreements were thought to be the same condition. More specifically, those involved in conflict were considered to be pathological, even anti-social. Because of these negative views of conflict, it has been suggested that conflicting parties should always strive to reduce or avoid conflict, certainly it should never be escalated. One reason people responded toward conflict in this manner was because conflict was often seen as a mere clash of personalities. Unfortunately, too many people have mistakenly believed that aggressive behavior and living in a peaceful relationship with others cannot coexist. (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991)

People use conflict skills regularly in everyday life. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) maintained that an individual's behavior in conflict situations can change. That is, these behaviors are not an inborn set of responses. Instead, conflict behavior involves communication skills that can be learned and developed.

Leadership and Conflict Management

"Disagreement among people in relationships, groups and organizations comes with the territory" (Kindler, 1988, p. 1). Therefore, according to Lewis and Jobs (1993), successful conflict management and successful leadership have been linked together. They posited leadership involves the leader's ability to influence members to realign goal-directed behaviors for the good of the

organization. Such a position is based inherently on the belief that leadership and conflict management successes result from similar, if not the same, behaviors during group interaction. Thus, Lewis and Job concluded leaders benefit from training that can both "develop a good understanding of conflict and to improve practices directed at its management" (p. 57).

It has been argued conflict management is one of many skills needed by leaders (Kreps, 1986). However, Lewis and Jobs (1993) indicated "the skills required to effectively manage conflict and to effectively lead are virtually one and the same" (p. 48). The interdependent relationship between effective leadership and conflict management is further evidenced in that both seek a means to allow an individual to move others toward a common perception of reality so they share a common understanding of where the organization is and where it should be going. This type of leadership reflects an increased commitment to work together to reach common goals. Kindler (1988) noted managing interpersonal conflict is not easy, yet the results for constructively dealing with these differences is gratifying.

Because everyone exhibits leadership behavior, trying to distinguish "leaders from nonleaders is...less an analysis of what people do that influences others and affects outcomes than it is of the frequency with which they do (or are seen to do) these things and the breadth and significance of the issues that they affect" (Birnbaum, 1992, p. 16). As leaders forge ahead in the business of managing conflict it is imperative that they demonstrate appropriate behaviors. Suggestions offered by Kindler (1988) include leaders (a) preserving the dignity and sense of personal self-respect for each person in the conflict, (b) listening to others with empathy, (c) recognizing it is extremely

difficult, if not impossible, to change others' behaviors, so work on your own, and (d) expressing their own independent perspectives of the issues at hand. Kindler concluded that such perspectives make up an attitudinal base which is helpful in managing conflict situations.

Lewis and Jobs (1993) warn us that "ineffective leadership is caused by inappropriate leader behavior that occurs because the leader's style conflicts with the situation" (p. 52). Yet, Hocker and Wilmot (1991) indicate that "people who are interdependent find, when they learn new skills and channel energy toward productive management of conflicts, that unforeseen options appear when conflict is treated as a problem to be solved instead of a battle to be won" (p. 3). They suggest that both relational and individual goals can be met. This appears more likely when the leader understands conflict and has the requisite skills to manage the conflict situation.

Definitions

Key definitions used in this field study were:

Conflict. "An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995, p. 21).

Competing. An individual seeks to "win" by focusing on self concerns over others' needs and wants in an assertive and uncooperative manner through defending a personal position which is believed to be the "correct" position (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Accommodating. The opposite of "competing"; A self sacrificing approach wherein an individual is unassertive and cooperative to the point that the person's own concerns are to satisfy the other party in the conflict (Thomas &

Kilmann, 1974).

Avoiding. An individual through an unassertive and uncooperative response fails to seek personal concerns or the concerns of the other party (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Collaborating. The opposite of "avoiding"; A person is assertive while being cooperative in an attempt to generate a plan of action for dealing with the conflict that is mutually satisfying and acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Compromising. The individual's goal is to find a course of action that is partially satisfying to all parties in the conflict, thus through an approach that is equally assertive and cooperative the middle ground is determined and accepted (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Methodology

Because the researcher's purpose was to determine if an individual's approach to conflict management could be altered by completing a college conflict resolution class, the study involved three hypotheses:

H1: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict and, thereby alter one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style.

H2: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and gender would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style.

H3: Active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and the individual's level of educatio.. would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style.

Subjects

The subjects (N = 28) in the pretest condition consisted of 15 females and 13 males who enrolled in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution through communication course at a medium-sized, midwestern university during a spring semester. There were 10 undergraduate (females = 7 and males = 3) and 18 graduate (females = 8 and males = 10) students who participated in the research project.

The subjects (N = 25) in the post-test condition consisted of 14 females and 11 males. Ten undergraduate (females = 7 and males = 3) and 15 graduate (females = 7 and males = 8) students composed this group.

Participation in the project was voluntary. The subjects who decided to participate in the research project were dealt with in accordance to the ethical standards as outlined in Principle 9, Research With Human Participants, "Ethical Principles of Psychologists," APA, 1981.

Apparatus

According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), the instrument was designed to "assess the mix of conflict-handling modes" (p. 11) a person might use when dealing with conflict. In this project the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument was used as a pre- and post-test instrument.

ument allows an individual to gain a clearer understanding of

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one's personal preferences in conflict situations. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) warn users that no one should be labeled as having a single style for dealing with conflict. However, they pointed out that "any given individual uses some modes better than others" (p. 11). Finally, they suggested a person tends to rely on one or more modes as a result of "temperament or practice" (p. 11).

The assessment instrument consisted of 30 sets of two statements. In order to complete the instrument the subject focuses on conflict situations wherein her or his wishes differ from the other party and ask the question, "How do you usually respond to such situations?" For each pair of statements the subject circles either the "A" or "B" statement that is most characteristic of the person's behavior. It is likely that both statements are appropriate choices for that individual, however, the subject is encouraged to select the response which would be a more response by that individual. For example, a subject would respond by placing a circle around the "A" or "B" statement for item two: A. I try to find a compromise solution. or B. I attempt to deal with all of his/her and my concerns. After completing the 30 sets of statements the respondent's answers are categorized according to the five management styles identified by Thomas and Kilmann (i.e., competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating).

Procedure

In order to complete this field project the following procedure was followed:

Phase I. At the first scheduled meeting of a spring semester conflict resolution through communication class the students were advised of the project and its purpose. Students were given an opportunity to transfer out of the

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course if they did not want to participate in the research project. They were assured of the protection of their rights to ethical treatment and the confidentiality of the data collected. All participants were advised the reported results would be grouped data and that no individual's name would be used. The subjects were asked to sign a release statement and told they could withdraw from the project at any time during the semester without penalty. The researcher provided students with an explanation of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. During the first scheduled class meeting the subjects were pretested using this instrument. Because the purpose of this research was to determine if taking a college conflict resolution thorough communication course would affect the subjects' perceived behavior during a conflict situation, the subjects scored their own responses. After scoring the respondents were asked to compare personal results to the normative data that had been graphed from the "original norm group, composed of managers of middle and upper levels of business and government organizations" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 8). Next, the subjects were instructed to plot personal responses for competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating on a two-dimensional model for handling conflict behavior (Thomas, 1976). This model is similar to "The Managerial Grid" (1964) developed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton. Further, the subjects were led in an interpretative discussion concerning the five conflict management styles, various perceptions of what a particular score in a given category might indicate, and implications of high, midrange, and low scores for each style of conflict management. By using individual scoring each subject was able to identify the area or areas needing improvement and focus on improvement in those areas during the semester. The subjects' answer

sheets were collected and the data were recorded for use in the future.

Phase II. During subsequent class meetings students were exposed to a variety of instructional formats (e.g., role-playing, case studies, lectures, and structured learning exercises). Subjects were asked to read Interpersonal Conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991, 3rd ed.). They were given four objective tests over the reading information throughout the semester. And, students were asked to complete two third-party assessments of a conflict situation (one using Stuart's Conflict Containment strategy and the other using Hocker-Wilmot Conflict Assessment Guide).

Phase III. During the two-hour final examination period no course test was given, however, the students were post-tested using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. The steps in Phase 1 were followed in completing the post-test.

Phase IV. Once the data had been gathered, it was analyzed using a SPSS Release 4.1 for IBM VM/CMS Statistical Package to determine if there were any significant differences between various means. The researcher completed a general crosstabs for two dimensions along with a one-way ANOVA and MANOVA tests to determine if differences existed between (a) pre- and post-test scores, (b) gender scores, and (c) education level scores.

Results

Having completed the procedure, it was necessary to analyze the data. In the following tables the data are provided concerning the results of the MANOVA test. The tests involved "test" within-subject effect for gender and education level.

Table 1

Pre- & Post-test Percentages

Item	Pre-% (N=28)	Post-% (N=25)
Competing	16.5	16.5
Collaborating	19.5	23
Compromising	24.5	24.5
Avoiding	19.5	18
Accommodating	20	18

Table 1 showed a perceptual shift toward the increased use of collaboration as a conflict management style among the subjects. Use of competing and compromising revealed no change. Subjects indicated decreased selection of avoiding and accommodating approaches to conflict.

Table 2

MANOVA Overall Gender Effects

Item	SS	DF	MS	F	SIG of F
Within cells	189.05	26	7.27		
Gender	66.16	1	66.16	9.10	.006

The data from Table 2 reflected a significant overall gender effect between the subjects' selection preferences in the pre- and post-test. A 95% confidence level was used and found the F-score to be significant at greater than 4.23.

Table 3

MANOVA Education Effects - Avoidance

Item	SS	DF	MS	F	SIG of F
Within cells	136.22	26	5.24		
Education	40.63	1	40.63	7.76	.010

In Table 3 the data suggested a significant education level effect concerning the subjects' selection preferences regarding the "avoidance" style. The one-way ANOVA also indicated a statistically significant difference on this variable. A 95% confidence level was used and found the F-score to be significant at greater than 4.23.

Table 4

ANOVA Overall Education Level Effects

Item	SS	DF	MS	F-ratio	F-prob
Between Groups	43.0865	1	43.0865	4.5561	.0424
Within Groups	245.8778	26	9.4568		

In Table 43 the ANOVA suggested a significant overall education level effect concerning the subjects' selection preferences regarding a conflict management style. A 95% confidence level was used and found the F-score to be significant at greater than 4.23.

Discussion

The researcher has provided related literature about conflict, conflict and leadership and completed the methodology as previously described. Also the results gathered through the procedure have been tabled and presented. At this point it is necessary to offer several conclusions about teaching conflict as well as the limitations of this study and implications for further research.

Conclusions

The first research hypothesis focused on whether or not active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict and, thereby alter one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style. This research concludes that, in fact, if an individual studies conflict and various techniques for managing it then the person is likely to alter one's behaviors. Certainly the data in Table 1 showed a shift in perceived behavior during conflict situations. The subjects shifted toward a preference in using a collaborative management style. This shift was away from using accommodation and avoidance to a more active, assertive, and cooperative stance when in conflict situations. However, subjects continued to indicate use of competing and compromising management styles.

Next, the second hypothesis suggested that active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and gender would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style. This hypothesis was upheld. The MANOVA test of the data reflected an overall gender effect on the perceived management behaviors when

dealing with conflict situations. Unfortunately, where this shift actually occurs was not clearly identified. This researcher theorizes the shift in preference was away from accommodation for females and away from competing for males while both females and males used less avoidance with more collaboration.

And, hypothesis three stated that active participation in a 3-hour, 16-week college conflict resolution course using a variety of instructional approaches would enhance the subjects' understanding of conflict, and the individual's level of education would affect one's perceived preference when selecting a conflict management style. Once again the MANOVA test of the data showed an overall effect. Further analysis was able to identify a difference in preferences toward avoidance. The more educated group indicated less reliance on avoidance than did the other group. It would seem that the more highly educated individuals found it more satisfying to meet conflict head-on and deal with it. Perhaps the more educated subjects had more confidence and more knowledge, thus they were able to recognize the importance of dealing with conflict directly except in a few situations (e.g., when tempers flare or it's a political move to gain time).

Finally, this field study upholds the opening quotation of Hocker and Wilmot (1995) used in this paper. Teachers of conflict management can inform their students that they have the opportunity to change their part of the conflict interactions. With Hocker and Wilmot it is possible to claim, "What you have learned can be relearned a different way" (p. 2).

In summary, the data from this research showed: (a) analysis of the pre- and post-test data revealed that for H1 the subjects used a mix of conflict management styles with increased preference for collaboration, (b) analysis of

the pre- and post-test data showed a significant overall effect of gender on the perceived conflict management style used in various situations, however, a cell by cell analysis did not identify specific changes, and (c) more education resulted in decreased preference for the avoidance approach to conflict management.

Limitations of this Study

Having conducted this project, there appeared to be two limiting factors that should be mentioned. First, the results are based on a small sample size. And, this researcher did not control for extraneous variables which might have affected the learning curve of the subjects.

Implications for Further Research

Other researchers interested in improving people's ability to effectively manage conflict at home, work, and play are encouraged to experiment with specific instructional techniques in an effort to identify ways to teach the subject more effectively. Also, it is hoped there will be additional attention given to identify which management style is more effective in specific conflict situations and how it is affected by culture and socioeconomic factors as well as gender and education level. Finally, it seems reasonable to suggest a cohort of subjects could be followed over a period of years to determine long-range effects of taking a college course dealing with conflict management through communication.

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